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Hyper-Conformity as Counter-Narrative in Nelly Arcan's *À ciel ouvert*

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CONCURRENT WITH A RISE in life-writing across twenty-first-century women's œuvres, Nelly Arcan's corpus is mostly autofictional, telling the story of women marked in irreversible ways by the pornography, prostitution, media, and beauty industries. It is clear from Arcan's works that, for her, such stories are indicative of the inevitably oppressive condition of contemporary women's sexuality. Power, discourse, and sexuality, such as Michel Foucault has theorized them in *Histoire de la sexualité*, are inextricably linked in Arcan's work: women internalize the male gaze and dominant sexual discourses of the time in which they are situated, bearing their consequences in lieu of escaping them.¹ In short, Arcan's works are linked to a nihilistic perspective: a reminder of her suicide in 2009, only two years after the publication of her third novel, *À ciel ouvert*.² Critics such as Isabelle Boisclair, Martine Delvaux, and Isabelle Larochelle have suggested that Arcan's fatalistic response to hegemonic discourses possesses a testimonial functionality.³ By acquiescing to such discourses, Arcan is testifying to the oppression of women and thus is transforming her oppression into a counter-narrative tactic. Such a tactic aligns with Arcan's own identity, which has been deemed a living paradox, at once prostitute and celebrated author, victim, and agent of her own demise.⁴ As affirmed in her first autofictional publication *Putain* (in which the events are based partly on the author's past), "Arcan" is verbally and physically abused, and sexually and financially dominated by male clients and romantic partners alike. Yet she acquiesces to their demands, competes unforgivingly with other women for male attention, invests inordinate amounts in designer clothes and cosmetic surgery, and is responsible for her initial immersion in the sex trade.⁵

The female protagonists in *À ciel ouvert* – translated into English as *Breakneck*⁶ – are similarly invested in their appearance, as well as being politically and intellectually engaged. The heroine Rose is a successful fashion photographer, and Julie, her neighbor, is an award-winning documentary maker who focuses on pedophilia and cosmetic surgery. Both women compete for the attention of one man, Charles, dramatically transforming their bodies in the process: Rose through lip augmentations, Julie by cutting herself. They do so to satiate his fetish for surgical interventions and wounds on women's bodies, which we learn is inspired by his father's misogynist delusions and his profession as butcher. Julie and Rose's attempts to seduce Charles through these extreme measures exacerbate his fetish so that, like his father, he becomes delusional. In the end, Rose undergoes a vagino- and labiaplasty operation, and later reveals her post-surgery vulva to Julie, Charles, and their spectating neighbors while on-set for the filming of one of Julie's documentaries. Rose exposes herself in this way to attract Charles' attention and incite his desire, but instead he considers this act a personal betrayal (at the acme of his delusional state). Unable to cope with Rose's unorthodox act of unfaithfulness, he throws himself from the rooftop to his death. The female protagonists' actions thus inadvertently result in the death of the man they desire.

The novel is split into two sections: the first constitutes a socio-political critique of women's condition, while the second tells the story of Charles, Julie, and Rose's declining relationships. I will begin with the former, examining how women's sexuality is shown to act in the interest of male desire to the detriment of their own subjectivity. I will then explore the ways in which this unequal gendered dynamic is shown to be shaped and preserved by the sex and beauty industries. Finally, I will focus on the fetishistic elements of the story to outline how the presentation of Rose's actions simultaneously reflects and contests dominant cultural and social narratives pertaining to female sexuality. I will show how, through a

satirical narrator, these actions allow a protest call to emerge that both *oversteps socio-political boundaries* and recalls their *impassibility*.

Sexual desire and female objectification

Sexual desire and female objectification are inextricably linked from the outset of *À ciel ouvert*. The novel opens with Julie sunbathing beneath the open sky, a scene that foreshadows the end of the novel where Charles refers to Rose's vulva as "ce sexe à ciel ouvert" (*Ciel* 250) as he falls to his death with his face turned towards the clouds. (Julie's documentary is staged on the communal roof terrace, which means that when Rose exposes her vulva she does so quite literally beneath the open sky.) The intimation made is that sex, not God, dominates the protagonists' lives, as emphasized by Charles' additional references to Rose's vulva as "la Volonté" and "la Vérité" (*Ciel* 237), and when Julie states that the sunny day "donnait l'impression de s'être agenouillé, prosterné sur le corps de Montréal" (*Ciel* 11). The end is preempted again, when Charles genuflects before Rose's vulva (*Ciel* 239). Such hyper-sexualized imagery is extended to the most banal of locales, with a gym being described as the setting of an orgy (*Ciel* 137), and Rose claiming that "C'était une erreur de dire qu'à la naissance on sortait d'un sexe parce qu'en fait on y restait pris [...] la vie n'allait jamais ailleurs que dans le sexe" (*Ciel* 179). Here lies the underlying moral and *fil conducteur* of the novel: sex (metonymically connoted by Rose's genitals) determines all human behavior. Such is the way of the world it seems, since this setting constitutes "un voisinage planétaire" (*Ciel* 7). In the opening scene where Rose and Julie silently observe each other, Julie privately reflects on their mutual investment in plastic surgery as two women in their early thirties (*Ciel* 15-16). According to the omniscient narrative voice, they are beautiful only because of their will and efforts, a non-negotiable link to "la Volonté," the sexual drive that controls the

narrative and, according to Charles, the world (*Ciel* 250). Sexual desire therefore acts as a catalyst for women's auto-objectification.

From the very beginning, this omnipresent sexual desire is presented as a male-orientated affair, as suggested by Rose's discussion of male and female desire:

Rose [...] avait cette théorie que les hommes n'étaient pas matière à érection pour les femmes, que c'était au contraire le sexe des hommes qui était une loupe qu'ils promenaient sur le corps des femmes pour en connaître le grain, et qu'ensuite seulement venait l'érection des femmes, au contact de la loupe, dans laquelle elles se contemplaient elles-mêmes. (*Ciel* 39)

Arcan marries Lacanian theory on the Phallus with that of the mirror stage,⁷ with the woman in this scenario recognizing herself as subject by looking into the Phallus-as-mirror. In so doing she is deprived of her subjective being *pour soi* since this process occurs through and for the penis, in keeping with Jacques Lacan's view that sexual development occurs mainly in relation to the Phallus. In addition, man as object of desire is expelled from sex in this scene, given that "l'érection des femmes" stems not from a man or male member but from woman's own reflection (albeit mediated by the Phallus). Female pleasure here is thus inextricably linked to women's position as a sexed object; women recognize themselves as subjects (by looking in the mirror) once they acknowledge their object-position (the mirror).

More obviously still, there is no female gaze to speak of aside from women looking back at themselves from a male and phallic perspective. According to John Berger's conceptualization of the male gaze in *Ways of Seeing*, women have historically been 'kept' and protected by men, and thus have come to view themselves as men might do, causing women to watch themselves continually.⁸ As a result, "women's self-being [is] split in two,"

as woman-as-observer (male ‘*surveyor*’) and women-as-observed (female ‘*surveyed*’), and women transmute themselves into visual objects for men in compliance with their perceived male tastes (Berger 46-47). In *À ciel ouvert*, this merging of the male gaze and phallic perspective, moreover, via the magnifying glass (“loupe”) and phallus (“le sexe des hommes”), echoes Stephen Heath’s assertion that the male gaze stands in for the phallus in sexual representation,⁹ as well as Gertrud Koch’s claim that “The woman nevertheless has the phallus in sexual pleasure.”¹⁰ Heath’s view is particularly appropriate since, for him, this correlation means that the woman as looked-at object signifies not castration, but the phallus, indicating that women’s position as looked-at objects must remain a fixture of sexual representation to deflect men’s fear of castration. Women’s status as looked-at objects works not for the sake of female pleasure, but to secure men’s by disavowing the site of castration. In this way, women’s sexual identity exists not for itself but as an offshoot of the male gaze and castration complex.

Likely suspects: a critique of the sex and beauty industries

Arcan draws a correlation between these gendered structures in sex and those common to prostitution. Putting forward her own view on the causes of sexual difference, Rose explains that the fall of Christianity led to a widened acceptance of prostitution, necessitating (according to “la logique darwinienne” [*Ciel* 178]) that the most beautiful female specimens be selected by traders to maintain a high capital amid increased competition in the marketplace. This analogy is reiterated when Rose refers to her mother and sister “quittant les unes après les autres le clan femelle pour se coller aux males” (*Ciel* 178). The reference to a “clan” alludes to tribalism, and the terms “femelle” and “males” hold animalistic connotations in French. The status quo of a Godless age is not a new one then, but a modern revival of natural selection and an ethos of survival of the fittest. Similarly, Nancy Huston

suggests in her introduction to Arcan's *Burqa de chair* that pornography proves as detrimental to women's rights as religion had been (Huston, "Arcan" 24). Whereas Huston interprets this Darwinian reference literally, however, using it as evidence of Arcan's biologically determinist position (Huston, "Arcan" 20), I would interpret it as an ironic rebuttal of prostitution based on a reading of Rose's explanation. Rose explains that such an event stems from the fact that heterosexual men are outnumbered in the global population by women and homosexual men, which leads to greater rivalry among women in terms of sexual appeal essential to securing a mate (*Ciel* 73-79). Julie later discovers that the reverse is true, that there are more men than women, and that statistics on homosexuality are non-existent or, where existent, point to an equal percentage of gays and lesbians (*Ciel* 150). She deduces that Rose invented such figures to inspire sympathy and surprise. Indeed, Rose's discourse on men and women makes us question the supposed persistent urgency with which women seek to outdo one another. This is a fictional configuration of "la race des sorcières aveugles et des belles-mères jalousies" in Arcan's *Putain*, each of these female figures motivated by a prevailing refrain: 'miroir, miroir, dis-moi qui est la plus belle' (*Putain* 24-25).

These behavioral patterns are shown to be exacerbated by the beauty industries, particularly fashion. During a fashion shoot in *À ciel ouvert*, female models are scantily clad and guided by directors to adopt positions akin to those in pornography: spreading their legs, kissing, and touching other women's breasts (*Ciel* 212). Rose is responsible for styling models ahead of shoots, which she says consists in 'undressing' women to ensure the erection of male viewers: "les vêtements qu'elle leur choisissait ne devaient pas les revêtir mais les déshabiller. Elle était une arrangeuse de chair à faire envier, ou bander" (*Ciel* 27-28). Rose's boyfriend Charles, who works alongside her as a photographer, also struggles to capture natural shots of the models since they often pout and conform to clichés (*Ciel* 212). Stereotypes from pornography are internalized and remobilized by the women, and they

operate in the interest of male desire. What Naomi Wolf famously deemed “the beauty myth” is thus a self-fulfilling prophecy and propagates the notion that, as Hilary Lips puts it, “women’s only effective source of feminine influence is beauty and sex appeal.”¹¹ One is also reminded of Foucault’s observation that “les relations de pouvoir ne sont pas en position d’extériorité à l’égard d’autres types de rapport (processus économiques, rapports de connaissance, relations sexuelles), mais [...] leur sont immanentes,” and that “le pouvoir vient d’en bas” (Foucault 124-25). Power is immanent within the beauty industry here, emanating not from a higher authority but from the female actors within it, through whom sexualized social and cultural narratives on beauty are circulated.

Rose’s role as photographer, however, grants her comparatively more power. The omniscient narrative voice even describes Rose as consuming the women she photographs (*Ciel* 45). If photography is a means of objectifying women, Rose is exempt as the spectating subject. That is not to say though that Rose escapes conformity, as is evident during a photoshoot for Julie’s documentary where Rose takes center stage. She poses for Charles while lathering herself in sun cream – a sexual innuendo that further alludes to pornography – despite Charles’ assertion that “Être un bon modèle c’est se plier à la consigne, et la consigne est d’accepter d’être photographié hors de la pose” (*Ciel* 231). Needless to say, he considers her a considerably “mauvais modèle” (*Ciel* 230). Rose refuses to abandon her performance because in her opinion “la contrariété ne peut pas être exploitée, comme tu dis. Si oui, ça reste du jeu, c’est encore de la pose” (*Ciel* 230-31). By conforming to pornographic clichés, Rose ironically acts outside of the rules enforced by Charles and takes charge of the script. Rose thus employs her object-status and sexualization to gain control, thereby evading facile judgments about female emancipation, and her playful response to the shoot assignment additionally draws attention to the inescapability of performance.

Performance is depicted as a fundamental characteristic of the feminine condition and is best conveyed in *À ciel ouvert* through the motif of cosmetic surgery. It personifies the double bind of female identity, what the omniscient narrative voice terms “le grand paradoxe de la coquetterie féminine, de la mascarade” (*Ciel* 120), asserting that “Dans toutes les sociétés, des plus traditionnelles aux plus libérales, le corps des femmes n’était pas montrable, enfin pas en soi, pas en vrai” (*Ciel* 183-84). The basic premise of this paradox is twofold. First, while many women undergo surgical operations to enhance their appearance, they must simultaneously reinforce the illusion of natural youth. Such an endeavor, however, is virtually impossible because the artificiality of their appearance betrays them. Second, while women are increasingly visible and unclothed in the media and pornography, the representation of *au naturel* women so to speak – whose appearance is not altered by surgical or cosmetic means – is becoming less frequent. A comparable quandary is suggested by Huston in *Reflets dans un œil d’homme* when she claims that Western women are free to vote, work, and “se recouvrir de ce que Nelly Arcan appelle une ‘burqa de chair’ et de s’enfermer de son propre gré dans ce que Fatema Mernissi appelle le ‘harem de taille 38,’” when she states that “le nu intégral est à peu près aussi libérateur que l’islam intégriste.”¹² Parallels of this kind are reinforced when Julie envisages a documentary entitled “Burqa de chair” about plastic surgery (*Ciel* 185), a foreshadowing of Arcan’s posthumous text of the same name published in 2011.¹³ The recurrence of this expression reinforces the idea that all women are obliged to reject their bodies *en soi* and to veil themselves in layers of artifice.

Plastic surgery is a particularly dangerous influence in this regard, in so far as it supports the misogynist project of pornography and the fashion industry: to make all women look the same and reinforce the figure of the ideal woman, as Martine Delvaux has argued in *Les filles en séries*.¹⁴ In fact, Delvaux equates dolls to the women in Arcan’s works when she describes Barbie as “la burqa de chair de Nelly Arcan version jouet” (Delvaux 49). Women

are bound to conform to a set mold like dolls, such as Hans Bellmer's figurative depictions of his partner Unica Zürn cited in Delvaux's work. Bellmer was a German surrealist artist whose works consisted largely in life-size pre-pubescent dolls, often contorted, broken or deconstructed. Despite the formal, geographical, and temporal distance between Hans Bellmer's *La poupée* series and Arcan's work (the former a fine art piece produced in 1930s Paris, and the latter a Quebecois publication at the start of the millennium), and the differences between their aesthetic and political objectives (Bellmer's treatment of the female figure arises from the objectification of women and idealization of pre-pubescent femininity that Arcan is critiquing),¹⁵ it is revealing to compare the two, especially because both creative representations of women prefigure living women's fates. Not only are Bellmer's compositions harrowing, but they prefigure Zürn's suicide by defenestration (Huston, *Reflets* 214), while Arcan posted a photograph on her (unpublished) online blog just hours before hanging herself,¹⁶ depicting what Huston terms "une visée en plongée d'une poupée Barbie grandeur nature, étalée sur le dos, apparemment à la suite d'une chute" (Huston, *Reflets* 219).

These kindred fates convey a bleak message about ideals of femininity, where escape from oppression takes the form of death. Delvaux explains that such ideals work in the interest of a masculine fantasy, which seeks "une féminité inorganique et inanimée" (Delvaux 49) and depends on the relegation of women to the realm of childhood. Ideals of feminine beauty thus correlate to pedophilic tendencies, to which plastic surgery is shown to contribute in *À ciel ouvert*. There are references to women wanting smaller reproductive parts through surgical operations to emulate a child's anatomy (*Ciel* 171), which Rose opts for despite the reservations of her surgeon. The result is a prepubescent vulva – devoid of pubic hair – and vagina, incapable of producing period blood.

Overstepping boundaries?

Rose's vaginoplasty and labiaplasty nonetheless grant her a certain power, albeit relative. Primarily, Rose's coercion of her surgeon into committing to her operation testifies to her agency. Additionally, Charles' distorted sexuality and fetishistic obsession must be taken into account. Charles' father was mentally unstable and held theories about murderous, Amazonian women – the enemies of men – and about an all-seeing eye (“troisième œil par le sexe qui voyait tout venir de loin”) intent on men's demise (*Ciel* 59). He also worked as a butcher, often locking Charles in a meat freezer for hours. It then transpires that Charles formed a fetish for post-surgery wounds on women, as well as cosmetically enhanced body parts (particularly breasts). Rose satiates his fetish through lip surgery, and vagino- and labiaplasty, as does Julie by cutting her breasts and inner thighs, which is reminiscent of Arcan's self-harm as described in her second autofictional novel, *Folle*.¹⁷ These sources of Charles' fetish are consonant with Sigmund Freud's theorization: the Amazonian women, the vulva, and the eye symbolize the castrating mother, and the meat inspires Charles' fetish for wounded flesh – a fetish being defined by Freud as something that men turn to as a means of deflecting a fear of castration, in a process Freud calls *Verleugnung* or “disavowal.”¹⁸ As an archetypal example, Freud cites the moment when a boy spies a girl's or woman's clitoris for the first time, and mistakes it for a castrated penis (Freud 318). In the final part of this article, we will see how these Freudian foundations are overturned over the course of the narrative. There is also a link to be made between butcher's meat, wounded women's flesh, and Arcan's text and Julie's documentary “Burqa de chair” about people who undergo plastic surgery. Arcan reinforces this connection in “L'enfant dans le miroir,” one of the articles published in *Burqa de chair* itself, when she describes herself looking in the mirror as a piece of “charcuterie” for the first time.¹⁹ The wider function of this imagery is thus twofold: it sets

up the Freudian structures to be capitalized on at a later stage, and it highlights a loaded symmetry between the meat and beauty industries.

Rose and Julie adopt antithetical approaches to Charles' fetishism. Rose happily yields to his eccentricities as a way of securing his fidelity (since other women would be unlikely to grant him similar favors), while Julie (who seduces Charles and replaces Rose as his girlfriend) is never quite as "consentante," despite going further in her efforts to please him (*Ciel* 192-94). Although Julie indulges his fantasies by scarring her own body, she considers his fetish an illness (his "dieu" [*Ciel* 191]), advising him to seek professional advice. In the end it is Julie who falls ill from exhaustion and stress, described as a carcass (*Ciel* 192-94). This transition serves as a catalyst for Charles' shame and consequent mental decline. He begins to experience hallucinations like his father's, perceiving the same all-seeing eye. Rose, on the other hand, capitalizes on Charles' fetish to regain his affection and vanquish her rival, Julie, for his attention. While Julie attempts to cure Charles of his fetish for his sake, pandering to his whims with open disdain, Rose liberally indulges him and exploits his fetish to her advantage. These polarized outlooks provide a nuanced portrayal of consent and agency, with Rose gaining the upper hand regardless of her dominated, fetishized, and objectified position.

Halfway through the novel, Rose notices that Charles is still looking up images of plastic surgery wounds online (his illicit penchant), which leads Rose to believe that Julie is not enough for Charles: "autant de preuves que Julie n'était pas la Femme, n'avait pas la Totale, ne portait pas le Sexe" (*Ciel* 175). As she puts it, his viewing habits indicate that he is still a little boy and thus that she can make herself "Un sexe d'enfant pour un enfant" (*Ciel* 175). One can presume this "sexe d'enfant" would constitute "le Sexe" and make her "la Femme," "la Totale." She plans to reveal her new vulva to him in front of Julie, making Charles (she hopes) wild with desire, so that Julie can bear witness to the fact that Rose, not

Julie, is the only one for him. The turning point, however, occurs once Charles' madness (spurred on partly by Julie's attempts to normalize him, without a little irony) coincides with Rose's transformation. Hoping to arouse him, Rose sends him some photographs of her vulva, but Charles interprets her disfigured genitalia as an incarnation of the all-seeing sex his father spoke of. Within the vulva he sees an eye,²⁰ through which he hears his father saying "“Mon fils, je m'étais trompé. Les femmes ne sont pas nos ennemis. Rose, leur chef, est l'Amazone, la voie”" (*Ciel* 237). The voice also instructs Charles to follow Rose's voice and obey her. Though this voice is a figment of Charles' imagination, it is clear that Arcan is setting up an antithetical 'voie' to the sex and beauty industries. Here, it is women who lead the way and men who must follow. Furthermore, this scene allows for a revision of the Lacanian model of sexual subjectivity. Lacan maintained that sexual subjectivity is split into two gendered categories – “active/masculine and passive/feminine,” as Mandy Merck puts it – which Rose problematizes by actively embodying the feminine position of passive, looked-at object (“le Sexe”) and passively embodying that of looker (the third eye).²¹ Rose's position as looker is especially crucial. Unbeknown to her, she usurps the place of the Amazonian women and third eye in Charles' hallucinations (each representative of the castrating mother) and thus figuratively castrates Charles. Ironically, therefore, Rose's extreme auto-fetishization – through a form of vagino- and labiaplasty that leaves her with 'le Sexe' – sets into motion events that are diametrically opposed to the purpose of a fetish according to Freud. Where Freud considered a fetish to be deployed as a means of disavowing the site of castration, Charles' witnessing of Rose-as-fetish ('la Femme') figuratively castrates him instead.

Rose continues with her plan on the night of Julie's photoshoot for her “Burqa de chair” documentary, filmed on the same rooftop described at the beginning of the novel. Rose is excited for her grand unveiling, which she believes will stimulate Charles' desire beyond

imagination and, once photographed, serve as a source of enjoyment for other male fetishists. She thus hopes to contribute to the same online pornographic community that inspired her operation. However, her plan does not unfold as intended. Rose gathers the neighbors to see her vulva, saying “‘Venez voir le clou du documentaire de Julie O’Brien! Jetez un œil sur le destin de la Femme-Vulve! Venez en admirer la tenue!’” (*Ciel* 247). The neighbors comply, assuming this is a documentary in the making, and Charles is horrified to see Rose exposed in this way since, owing to his state of mental instability, he thought he was The Chosen One, specially selected to view the chief of the Amazonians’ (Rose’s) vulva. Both Julie and Charles flee the scene, and Rose’s plan subsequently falls through since neither of her intended viewers are present. In the end, Charles believes he has failed in his life’s mission, having failed the third eye, and he throws himself from the balcony, giving up his body to the sky, which the narrative voice refers to as a “sexe” opening up before him (*Ciel* 250-51). The title of the novel *À ciel ouvert* thus becomes synonymous with *À sexe ouvert* (defining Rose in the final scene) and reverts to the opening message that sex is omniscient and omnipresent.

Hyper-conformity as counter-narrative

There are multiple ways in which Rose’s plans constitute a counter-narrative strategy. For one, while the women in *À ciel ouvert* are oppressed by beauty ideals that relegate women to the role of object, Rose exploits this position by becoming “le Sexe,” “la Femme.” Yet she also becomes a monster, as she refers earlier in the novel to Michael Jackson and Donatella Versace, who disfigure themselves beyond recognition through plastic surgery. Her transformation thus signifies a dramatic break from the ideal of feminine beauty by embodying the monstrous figure of the abject which, according to Julia Kristeva, “ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles,” and which disturbs “une identité, un système, un ordre.”²² Rose thus hyperbolizes the colonization of women’s bodies by beauty industries

who peddle and profit from ideals of female beauty and desirability, by becoming the ideal *par excellence* of “la Femme.” After all, the narrative voice refers to many other women seeking out vaginal reductions like Rose’s. By conforming to very real practices and exaggerating them to the extreme, Rose serves as a mirror to the feminine condition. By metamorphosing into an abject form, what Kristeva describes as being outside of social norms (Kristeva 12), Rose reflects the logical end-point of social conventions on feminine beauty.

In addition, Rose likens her vulva to transsexuals in Madrid, whom she terms “femmes-vulves” (*Ciel* 222). Ironically, therefore, by turning her vulva into “le Sexe,” Rose loses her gender specificity and is reborn as neither woman nor man, but as sex *en soi* (as the “femmes-vulves” are presented). She embodies her own mode of oppression by making it her body, saying that her sex covered her from head to toe. Yet as Rose herself explains, heterosexual men too enjoy the “masquerade” of transsexuality (*Ciel* 99), the term masquerade consonant with the earlier references to masks and women’s coquettishness. These narrative additions imply that whether someone is born a man or a woman, the defining quality of womanhood consists in artifice. Transsexuals and women alike have to transform themselves through plastic surgery, make-up, and clothing to make themselves desirable to men, which recalls Simone de Beauvoir’s celebrated claim that “on ne naît pas femme, on le devient,” and to Judith Butler’s theory of performativity.²³ It is not enough to be born woman to be one; one must perform as image and object. Rose’s sex as caricature metonymically represents not just biological women’s condition but that of women *tout court*. Rose’s vulva being “le Sexe,” moreover, means that it represents on some level both female and male genitals: it becomes The Phallus. Rose’s sex becomes the phallic magnifying glass discussed earlier, which controls sex and serves as a mirror to women who exist for and through the male gaze. Yet this narrative is orchestrated by Julie, Rose, and the

omniscient narrative voice of Arcan, and the dramatic exposition of women's exploitation at the hands of the beauty industry symbolized by Rose's operation condemns rather than accommodates the male gaze. The eye that Charles spies within Rose's vulva metaphorically reflects the female gaze that emerges out of women's oppression in this novel.

Laura Mulvey's *Sexual Cinema*, written over four decades ago, is still crucial to rethinking a gendered gaze in this way. Mulvey explains that sexual cinema is geared towards a male gaze with women as its object, and that women are objectified, abused or fetishized to obliterate the memory of the site of castration and thus accommodate for the contingencies of male desire.²⁴ In *À ciel ouvert*, Rose also attends to Charles' psychological needs by fetishizing her genitals. However, Rose does so on her own terms, and her surgery grants her power over him and Julie. Additionally, Julie's attempts to normalize Charles unintentionally cause his mental unhinging, as he starts to conceive of his fetish as a medical problem. Consequently, Charles is disgusted when faced with Rose-as-fetish (her vulva), which culminates in his suicide. Subsequently, the scene of castration is not disavowed in these scenarios but exploited. The death of the male subject symbolizes the furthestmost loss of masculine identity and potency, and hence the ultimate outcome of the castration complex. Women are also more empowered than men here, inverting the oedipal dynamics privileged in visual sexual representation.

This achievement notwithstanding, Rose's ascension to power cannot be called a traditional victory. Her auto-fetishization is enacted not for her own pleasure, but to wreak revenge on her love rival Julie and ensure Charles' fidelity in the face of inevitable competition. We are later informed that she "aurait aimé d'un même coup prendre la résolution de ne pas se sacrifier sur une table d'opération," but that she was resigned to the act ("c'était celle d'une force qui la dépassait") (*Ciel* 179). Rose's transformation is therefore less a matter of choice than one of resignation, as the chain of events she hopes to initiate

rests on the execution of this first operation. This transformation is crucial to regaining Charles' unreserved attention, to avenging herself on Julie, and securing a place for herself as "la Totale" within the small cyber-community of male fetishists. The first two objectives fail to materialize, with Charles dead and Julie unaffected, which edifies Rose's definitive lack of control. Rose's reaction remains open to speculation, and the reader is left to interpret this denouement as they see fit, as either failure or success.

Conclusion

In the end, Rose fails to ensure her own pleasure and to avoid oppression altogether. Yet Arcan's characters and narration form a critical pastiche of contemporary women's condition and condemn the beauty industry (notably fashion and cosmetic surgery), which the omniscient narrative voice conceives of as the handmaiden of prostitution and pornography; they all manipulate and market impossible ideals of female beauty and desirability. Further, Arcan navigates these discursive sites to secure for her heroine a form of power and autonomy, albeit relative, and to allow a feminine gaze to control the narrative, thereby subverting phallogentric psychoanalytic structures. Arcan breaks with women's condition by satirizing normative conventions of feminine beauty and, above all, by creating characters who embody them to their furthest extremity. By orchestrating her own hyper-sexualization and hyper-objectification, moreover, Rose's actions problematize a victim-agent binary, in a way that testifies to the stringent limits imposed on women's sexual and bodily empowerment. Like her other novels, Arcan's *À ciel ouvert* shows that one can never be outside of male-orientated, hegemonic discourses, but it also reveals how *hyper-conformity* can constitute a sign of protest in itself as a satirical mode of witnessing.

Notes

¹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 41-42, 128-30.

² Nelly Arcan, *À ciel ouvert* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007). Nancy Huston addresses Arcan's nihilist prose in her introduction to *Burqa de chair*. Huston asserts that prostitutes, including escorts, are discouraged from thinking of themselves as mothers, which distances them from the production of life and a certain idealism that goes with it. Nancy Huston, "Arcan, philosophe," *Burqa de chair*, Nancy Huston, intro. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011), 16.

³ Martine Delvaux and Isabelle Boisclair, "Le party d'anniversaire," in *Je veux une maison faite de sorties de secours: Réflexions sur la vie et l'œuvre de Nelly Arcan*, Claudia Larochelle, ed. (Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 2015), 123-24, 126, 128, 131.

⁴ Danielle Laurin and Mélika Abdelmoumen, "Le rendez-vous manqué: Entrevue avec Nancy Huston," *Je veux une maison*, 30.

Bruce Benderson and Carl LeBlanc, "Caniches roses, pâtes infectes et blagues pornos," *Je veux une maison*, 108, 112.

⁵ Nelly Arcan, *Putain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 15-16, 94, 102.

⁶ Nelly Arcan, *Breakneck*, Jacob Hornel, trans. (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2015).

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 693.

⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 46.

⁹ Stephen Heath, "Difference," *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, Mandy Merck, ed. (London: Routledge, 1992), 77.

¹⁰ Gertrud Koch, “The Body’s Shadow Realm,” in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, eds.; Carol J. Clover, intro. (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 41.

¹¹ The founding premise of Wolf’s theory is that though women have become increasingly liberated and empowered since the Industrial Revolution, they have been increasingly made to feel as though beauty is their naturally defining feature (which, she adds, is a myth).

Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), 2-3. Hilary Lips, *Women, Men and Power* (Mayfield: Mountain View, 1991), 19, cited in *Society in Focus: An Introduction to Sociology*, William E. Thompson, Joseph V. Hickey, and Mica L. Thompson, eds., 8th ed. (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 305.

¹² Nancy Huston, *Reflets dans un œil d’homme* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2012), 292. Fatema Mernissi, *Le harem et l’occident* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 211.

¹³ Nelly Arcan, *Burqa de chair*, Nancy Huston, intro. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011).

Though there is a parallel between these two texts, Julie does not stand in as Arcan’s ‘alter-ego,’ since she conforms to the burqa ideology herself.

¹⁴ Martine Delvaux, *Les filles en série: Des barbies aux Pussy Riot* (Montréal: Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 2013), 47.

¹⁵ See Hans Bellmer, *La poupée* (1936), <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/82.57.9>.

¹⁶ Fabien Loszach, “Postface,” in Nelly Arcan, <http://nellyarcan.com/pages/postface.php>.

¹⁷ Nelly Arcan, *Folle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 150.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, James Strachey and Angela Richards, trans. and eds. (London: Penguin, 1991), 354-55.

¹⁹ “C’est une fois devenue grande que les miroirs me sont arrivés en pleine face et que devant eux je me suis stationnée des heures durant, m’épluchant jusqu’à ce qu’apparaisse une

charcuterie tellement creusée qu'elle en perdait son nom." Nelly Arcan, "L'enfant dans le miroir," *Burqa de chair*, 74.

²⁰ Like the bull's eye within Simone's vulva in Georges Bataille, *Histoire de l'œil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 74.

²¹ Mandy Merck, "General Introduction," *The Sexual Subject*, 1.

²² Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980), 12.

²³ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe: L'expérience vécue*, II (1986) (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2015), 13.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 12.

²⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *The Sexual Subject*, 26, 29.